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# Dr. Heidegger's Experiment Theme of Foolishness and Folly 1

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is rooted in a rather pessimistic view of human nature. The story argues that people are, for the most part, fools. They don't learn from their mistakes, they're generally prone to repeat them and we can't expect anyone to change for the better. In this story, foolishness is particularly associated with youth, or at least a youthful state of mind. Hawthorne does provide a counter-example to his foolish characters in the form of Dr. Heidegger, but even this character has his sinister side.

Provide sentence— intext documentation with page

1. In the opening paragraph, the narrator states that Heidegger's four guests "had been unfortunate in life." Are the fates of Heidegger's four guests due to misfortune, or to serious character flaws?
2. Each of Dr. Heidegger's four guests exemplify a different vice. Does Dr. Heidegger, too, embody a vice, or is he meant to be a positive example to counter the guests?
3. If he does embody a particular vice, which one?
4. Dr. Heidegger's seriousness and wisdom contrasts with the foolishness of his guests. This certainly has something to do with his role as a doctor conducting the experiment. But it raises an interesting question: what kind of doctor is Dr. Heidegger?

5-9. What are the different kinds of foolishness we see in "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment"?

What distinguishes each of the four guests from the others?

The Widow

Mr. Medbourne

Colonel Killigrew

Mr. Gascoigne

10. In illustrating the foolishness of his characters, Hawthorne condemns his readers as fools as well. The four guests are two-dimensional caricatures, not fully developed, three-dimensional characters. Because they are two dimensional characters, each character represents something. What do you think each represents?

Names (print)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_ Per.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Dr. Heidegger's Experiment Theme of Old Age 2**

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" explores questions of age and behavior. What does it mean to be old? What does it mean to be young? What is the difference between defining age physically, and defining it mentally or emotionally? One interpretation of the text suggests that age is a state of mind; if one believes one is young, one will act accordingly. The story's moralistic side argues that youth is associated with folly, but offers no hope for redemption in older age, either.

Provide sentence(s) from short story, intext documentation, with page number

**Questions About Old Age**

1. At the beginning of the story, are Heidegger's old guests miserable because they are old, or because of the decisions they've made in their lives?
2. What do we know about Dr. Heidegger's physical appearance? Why does Hawthorne go to such lengths to describe the appearance of the Doctor's study, yet give us so little information about the Doctor himself?
3. At the start of "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," the narrator says that the four guests "were sometimes thought to be a little beside themselves […] when worried either by present troubles or woeful recollections" (1). What does this cryptic line mean?

**What About This**

1. Dr. Heidegger already knows what the outcome of his experiment will be, because he already understands the nature of youth and folly. He only subjects his guests to the experiment for his own sadistic amusement.
2. What gives "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" its pessimistic tone?

Names (print)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Per.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Dr. Heidegger's Experiment Theme of the Supernatural 3**

Whether or not the eerie elements of "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" are actually supernatural is subject to debate. It's a question of theatrical showmanship vs. genuine superstitious belief. The theme creates a mood of doubt and forces the reader to ask some difficult questions about the nature of reality – at least as defined within the narrative. It also severely complicates our understanding of the title character, who has at least one foot in a sinister, supernatural realm.

Provide sentences from text – intext documentation with page number

The narrator says that all of Dr. Heidegger's dead patients stare back at him when he looks into his mirror.

1. Does this mean that Dr. Heidegger is responsible for all these deaths? Explain your reasoning.

1. Does it suggest a sort of guilt? What do you make of this cryptic line? Explain.
2. Similarly, what's the deal with Heidegger's dead fiancée? The narrator is rather ambiguous in describing her death. Are we meant to understand it as an accident, or the fault of Dr. Heidegger? Explain.
3. After the four guests have all been "transformed," in one sense or another, the three men fight over the widow, and we catch a glimpse of their reflection in Dr. Heidegger's mirror. The narrator tells us that the mirror reflects them as old people, not as the young people they now believe themselves to be. What do you take this to mean?

**What About This?**

Try on an opinion or two, plan out your points for a debate.

1. Does Hawthorne think Dr. Heidegger is playing God? If so, does he condemn him?

Names (print)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Per.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Dr. Heidegger's Experiment Theme of Transformation 4**

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is the story of four elderly friends who are transformed – or at least think they are transformed – back to young, vivacious individuals. The text plays with the idea of what it means to be transformed physically as opposed to mentally. Which of those two kinds of transformations actually takes place in the story is subject to debate. Hawthorne also asks whether we can learn from a transformation, particularly one as ephemeral as that which takes place in this story.

Provide intext documentation- sentence(s) from text and page number

1. Why is Dr. Heidegger in no hurry to grow young again? What does he know that his guests do not?
2. Are the transformations that take place in "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" physical, mental, or spiritual?
3. Dr. Heidegger sits back to watch as his patients are transformed – but does Dr. Heidegger undergo changes of any sort? Pay close attention to the physical descriptions of his character sitting in the chair.

Think about this

4. How is the setting sun an important key to understanding the "transformations" taking place inside Dr. Heidegger's study?

5. The guests' transformation proves that age is a state of mind, not a physical state.

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**Dr. Heidegger's Experiment Theme of Versions of Reality 5**

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is a story of illusion, deception, and doubt. The title character makes use of theatricality, wishful thinking, and even alcohol (in one interpretation of the story) to make experimental subjects of his friends. This illusory trickery even seeps into the narration – the narrator's shadowy evasions raise similar questions for the reader of what is real, what is fictional, and, most interestingly, whether or not it matters.

Provide sentences from the text---intext documentation and page numbers

1. What specific passages in the text support the interpretation that the elixir of life is real? What specific passages support the interpretation that the elixir is *not* real?
2. If Dr. Heidegger already believes that to grow young again is to make the same mistakes, why does he put his guests through the experiment anyway?
3. Is Dr. Heidegger honest with his guests? At what points, and why, does he deceive them?

**What About This?**

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is intentionally ambiguous as to whether or not the water in the vase really is the elixir of life.

4. How/Why is this information ultimately beside the story's main point.

5. How does the unreliability of the narrator serve to place the reader in the same state of uncertainty as Dr. Heidegger's

guests.